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ABSTRACT

This study examines the normalcy of adolescent risk-taking and proposes that the social adventures of adolescents have significance for the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships and self-identity. To evaluate the narrative role of shared risks in transforming different types of relationships, an interview procedure was developed in which 30 adolescents between the ages of 16 and 18 years were presented with hypothetical adventures. The subjects were asked to speculate about the interpersonal consequences of adventures shared with close friends versus acquaintances, and about the consequences of experiences that varied in terms of relative risks. A major theme to emerge in the course of this study concerns the importance that adolescents attach to secrecy and privacy. Th data indicate that adolescents perceive risk-taking as a mechanism for creating private experiences, or shared knowledge significant for group relations. Thus risk-taking functions to maintain and facilitate ingroup-outgroup boundaries. In addition, adolescents' tolerance for non-conforming expressions of selfhood may be limited to stable, close-friend relationships. Finally, conformity to group pressure may be a transient phenomenon, mediated by the developmental status of the group. (RJC)

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TAKING RISKS AND MAKING FRIENDS: A NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON ADOLESCENTS' ADVENTURES

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Introduction

Adolescents are reputed to be excessively risky and reckless. According to reports of problem behavior across the life span, the reputation is well earned (Kandel & Logan, 1984; Rutter & Giller, 1983; Fishburn, Abelson & Cisin, 1980). Consequences of risk-taking include teen pregnancy, drug addiction and automobile accidents--all recognized as major social problems. Recent efforts have been made, however, to place adolescent problem behavior in the context of normal development (e.g., Silbereisen, Eyferth and Rudinger, 1986). That is, risk-taking has been conceptualized as a deliberate and well-conceived means for accomplishing age-typical goals--peer group entry and adult status achievement, for example. The purpose of the research I'll be presenting today is to elaborate a perspective on the normalcy of adolescent risk-taking, and to examine it empirically.

I would like to propose that the social adventures of adolescents have significance for the development and maintenence of interpersonal relationships and self identity. Specifically, taking risks with one's friends creates a body of shared knowledge, symbolic meanings or group "culture" that may be used to define or redefine the boundaries of group membership. Although risk-taking and peer pressure are thought to go hand in hand, from this perspective peer pressure is more pervasive and subtle than generally assumed. It is less a push to conform than a desire to participate in experiences that provide a common identity.

The idea that shared risks provide material for fashioning relationships between self and other, is an idea that has been suggested by anthropological and psychological studies of the role of narrative in identity formation (Gergen & Gergen, 1983; Holland & Quinn, 1987; Rosaldo, 1986; Sarbin, 1986; Scheibe, 1986; White, 1988). The thrust of these studies is that people weave life experiences into coherent stories, or narratives, in ways that reconstruct images of themselves and the groups or communities with which they affiliate. Thus, narrative reconstructions of past events have been described as doubly refractive (White, 1988): (1) They provide a tool for defining one's self in relation to a collective; so they reflect social or synchronic relations; (2) They provide a means for organizing one's understanding of self in relation to a past; so they also reflect historical or diachronic relations. Synchronic and diachronic relations are claimed to be dialectically coordinated. That is, social interactions are nested onto and transform an understanding of a history of interactions.

Ethnographic analyses of folklore, hunting and fishing stories, and stories of war have shown the importance of historical narrative in the construction and reconstruction of individual and collective identities. Extrapolating from this, we would claim that the risks shared by adolescents are functionally equivalent to stories of hunting and battle exploits. They, too, provide content for narratives that organize in-group/out-group boundary relations and definitions of self. And, also, they reflect both synchronic and

diachronic relations. So, as events and experiences become incorporated into the collective culture, as they attain symbolic meaning for the group's identity, as they become part of narrated history, they also delimit the significance of future events and experiences. Applied to adolescent risk-taking and peer pressure, the extent to which it matters that one participate (i.e. "conform") in a specific group adventure, and the extent to which the adventure has significance for group identity, depends on the perceived history of one's relationship with the group. Close friends are identified according to a rich narrative of shared experiences that may, for example, absorb the shock of isolated instances of non-conformity. The same instances experienced in the context of an acquaintance relationship, however, that lacks a well articulated history, may profoundly and adversely affect the future of the relationship.

To evaluate the narrative role of shared risks in transforming different types of relationships, an interview procedure was developed in which adolescents were presented with hypothetical adventures. The subjects were asked to speculate about the interpersonal consequences of adventures shared between close friends versus acquaintances, and about the consequences of experiences that varied in terms of relative risk.

Subjects and procedure

Thirty subjects between the ages of 16 and 18 years participated in the study (18 males and 12 females). They were interviewed toward the end of summer vacation or a few months into the Fall semester when most were about to begin, or had begun their junior year of high school. All were recruited by word of mouth in a cluster samlping procedure. That is, certain teenagers were interviewed, and were asked for the names and telephone numbers of their friends. The friends were also interviewed until several discrete friendship groups had been defined. In general, both teenagers and parents were enthusiastic about the study.

Each subject was interviewed twice. Subjects determined the location of the interviews, and there was considerable variation: homes, schools, public libraries, parks, shopping malls, fast food restaurants. The typical pattern was to conduct the first interview in the subject's home, and the second interview in a local teenage "hang out". The first interview lasted usually one hour, the second, one and one-half hours. The data presented below were taken from the second interview. In it, subjects were read brief scenarios (described below) about teenagers who did or did not participate with friends in events that were more or less risky. Subjects were asked about the interpersonal consequences of participating and not participating, about how the consequences might vary for different relationships (close friend or acquaintance), and about how the consequences might vary according to the riskiness of the event.

One scenario told of a teenager, Eric or Erica, who went to a rock concert with some friends. The subjects were informed that none

of the friends had ever smoked marijuana before, but that one of them lit a marijuana cigarette and passed it around after Erica had parked the car in the stadium parking lot. After hearing the story, subjects were asked to consider the liklihood of Erica smoking the marijuana with her closest friends, compared to friends who weren't as close, and to provide reasons for their answers. They were then asked to speculate about how the friends would think and feel about each other if Erica decided to smoke, and if she decided not to smoke.

In another phase of the interview, subjects were asked to compare the interpersonal consequences of three situations that varied in terms of relative risk. In one situation, teenagers skipped school and went to the beach. In another, they went to the beach on a Saturday. In the third situation, teenagers went to a neighborhood barbeque with their families. Subjects were asked whether or not the friends would feel closer in some situations compared to others, and to provide reasons for their answers.

Interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed more or less verbatim. Analyses were based on the written transcriptions.

Results

In response to the marijuana smoking scenario, 86% claimed that the story character would be more likely to smoke with acquaintances compared to close friends. The reasons offered were remarkably consistent: "it's a chance to impress them"; "to become part of their group"; "you want them to form an image of you that's like the image they have of themselves"; "it's easy for friends who aren't close to form a bad opinion of you". In contrast, close friends were described as more forgiving. Said one: "Close friends look into the person, not the person's actions". A few teens mentioned that close friends might even respect Erica's non-conforming show of independence.

Nonetheless, the decision to smoke or not smoke, even in the company of close friends, was thought to be a decision of consequence. When asked "if Erica smokes the pot with her close friends, will that affect how the friends think and feel about each other?", 24, or 80% said that it would bring them closer together. Again, there was considerable consistency in the reasons provided. Most subjects talked about the importance of sharing a novel experience. Several mentioned the memories created by such an experience and of the enjoyment derived from talking about it later. Of those who claimed that the relationship would not be altered by smoking marijuana together, most (4 of 6) agreed that it would help maintain the relationship. What about the consequences of deciding not to smoke? When the adolescents were asked, "if Erica doesn't smoke the pot with her friends, will that affect how the friends think and feel about each other?", 18 (60%) agreed that it would, at least temporarily. Most of the reasons hinged on the idea that Erica would be on the outside of a shared experience. Still, this was thought to be of little consequence in the long run, providing it didn't happen too often. Likewise, of the remaining 12 who claimed that her decision

would have no effect on the friendship, 6 did so on the grounds that Erica had a good excuse for declining--she had to drive. Several suggested that the responsibility of driving should rotate between the friends, allowing equal participation at future marijuana smoking events.

Data presented thus far indicate that adolescents perceive participation in risk activities--in this case, smoking marijuana--as affecting the developmental course of interpersonal relationships. Sharing adventures brings people, close friends and acquaintances, closer together. Furthermore, the consequences of participating or not participating are seen to vary according to the status of the relationship--acquaintance relationships, in contrast to close friend relationships, are considered more volatile and more susceptible to the influence of shared risks.

The ways that risk taking facilitates relationships were explored more directly by asking subjects to compare the interpersonal consequences of participating in risky and less risky activities. Subjects were told first of the two beach situations (skipping school versus going on a Saturday), were asked, "are the friends likely to feel closer in one situation or the other, or not necessarily?", and were asked to provide reasons for their answers.

Insert Table 1 Here

The majority, 83%, claimed that the friends would feel closer if they skipped school and went to the beach, compared to going on a Saturday. Reasons fell into three categories. One category, representing 30% of the responses, stressed secrecy, privacy and freedom: "You have a secret that you share"; "no one else is around so you can do what you want". A second category, representing another 26%, included responses that emphasized how the novelty of the situation would create memories that would be talked about later. Responses in the third category, 44%, made reference to passing a test, surviving an ordeal, or showing one's committment to the group. Examples include: "You feel like you've made it through something together"; "You're rebellious together; you beat the establishment together"; "It shows what lengths you'll go to to be with the group".

Subjects were then asked whether going to a neighborhood barbeque would affect how the friends think and feel about each other. The vast majority, 90%, claimed that attending the barbeque would have no effect on the friends' relationship. Of these, 71%, mentioned the lack of privacy or freedom: "parents have a way of making everyone feel inhibited"; "you have to act like your parents expect you to act so you can't be as free"; "parents are gross and you can't talk seriously in front of them"; "it's not of your own will--your parents made you go". The remaining 29% indicated that a neighborhood barbeque would have no effect on how the friends think and feel about each other because there would be no sense of having survived an

ordeal--no excitment, fear of getting caught, or feeling of rebelliousness. Then there were the 3 subjects who claimed that a neighborhood barbeque is itself an ordeal that, if survived, would bring the friends closer together.

Discussion

D.W. Winnicott remarked once that adults should "hide among themselves what they come to understand of adolescence", that it would be "absurd" to write a book for adolescents on the subject of adolescence because it is a period of life in which one is caught up in personal discovery. A major theme to emerge in the course of this study concerns the importance that adolescents attach to secrecy and privacy. Certainly this is relevant to fears of getting caught or into trouble, but we think that the private lives of adolescents have deeper motives. One young woman expressed it this way:

> It's hard for me to have a group of friends and my mom there. She works with young kids and she's really good at reading people, and I have a problem with her trying to be my friends' friend. I like my mom, but she tries to talk to my friends like a friend. She wants to find out more about them and I feel like she is always watching me. Not to be nosey so much--just because she's interested in my life. It really bothers me.

The data indicate that adolescents perceive risk-taking as a mechanism for creating private experiences, or shared knowledge significant for group relations. Thus, as suggested by the narrative perspective, risk-taking functions to maintain and facilitate ingroup-outgroup boundaries. This was observed most directly in adolescents' comparisons of the consequences of smoking marijuana with close friends compared to acquaintances. The data are consistent with Youniss and Smollar's (1985) descriptions of how adolescents, but not younger children, value the individuality of close friends. But it is noteworthy that adolescents' tolerance for non-conforming expressions of selfhood may be limited to stable, close friend relationships. In less stable relationships, in the process of making friends for example, non-conformity may be viewed in a different light, and may have different implications for the relationship.

The idea that the impact of behavior varies according to the developmental status of the relationship follows Petrovsky's (1985) comment about typical conformity studies undertaken in small group psychology: Conformity to group pressure may be a transient phenomenon, mediated by the developmental status of the group. The focus shifts, then, from a pressure to conform, to the perceived importance of participation. In other words, peer pressure needs to be evaluated in terms of the existing relationship--the shared values and norms of conduct that define one's self in relation to a group. As told by one adolescent male, the difference is dramatic:

> There's all this crap about being accepted into a group and struggling and making an effort to make friends and not being

> comfortable about your won self-worth as a human being. You're trying very hard to show everyone what a great person you are, and the best way to do that is if everyone else is drinking therefore they think that's the thing to do then you might do the same thing to prove to them that you have the same values that they do and therefore you're okay. At the same time, the idea of peer pressure is a lot of bunk. What I heard about peer pressure all the way through school is that someone is going to walk up to me and say "Here. Drink this and you'll be cool". It wasn't like that at all. You go somewhere and everyone else would be doing it and you'd think, "Hey. Everyone else is doing it and they seem to be having a good time. Now why wouldn't I do this?" In that sense, the preparation of the powers that be, the lessons that they tried to drill into me, they were completely off. They had no idea what we are up against.

Shared adventures, then, provide content for the creation of shared knowledge and "cultural" meanings; they delineate the boundaries between in-group and out-group; they are stories of life that provide material for the construction of life stories. One subject said, "I don't want to be sitting in my rocking chair when I'm 60 and say "I remember the time when I went to the movies with my buddies". Another said, "If you plod along and do the same boring old thing your whole damn life you'll die a boring old fart". Hellen Keller put it more gently: Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing.

Table 1. Interpersonal consequences for situations that vary in risk.

		Contrast		
		[Skipping > Saturday]	>	[Barbeque]
Reason Category	secrecy	+ 30		- 71
	novelty	+ 26		0
	ordeal	+ 44		-29 (+10)

1. Numbers indicate percentage of total reasons provided. Subjects could provide more than one reason.

2. > : "preferred to"

3. + : situation provides opportunities for category.
   - : situation does not provide opportunities for category.

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